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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how families and schools can work together to better care for and foster learning in children who are deaf and hard of hearing. Four dimensions of the family-school relationship are addressed with 16 basic premises proposed. First, three premises offer a philosophical basis for family-school relationships and include adoption of an ecological perspective, redefinition of the role and preparation of the teacher, and a commitment to interprofessional cooperation. Second, family involvement is considered in five premises that emphasize empowering teacher attitudes, parent choice of type of involvement with schools, recognition of parents' varying needs and resources, school programs that target parents' strengths and priorities, and family partnerships with professionals. Third is the area of family support, information, education and skill development with seven premises. These address the importance of families' changing priorities and support needs, family support that is empowering, information sharing, effective parent-child interactions, and involvement of professionals with specialized skills and abilities. (Contains approximately 50 references.) (DB)

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These widely disseminated papers cover a broad range of timely topics, from describing innovative teaching strategies to reviewing the literature in an area of inquiry to summarizing the results of a research study. In every case, there is a common focus: improving the quality of education for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. The Clerc Center welcomes feedback about the concepts presented, particularly in the case of 'working papers,' which often represent works in progress or express the views or experiences of an author.

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Introduction

It is commonly agreed that the more families know and understand about their child's schooling, the better able they are to provide nurturing and substantive support to learning at home. An important mechanism for facilitating family involvement in the child's education is the family-school relationship. Researchers and teachers, in general, indicate that the nature and characteristics of the family-school relationship influence schooling outcomes.

There are multiple ways parents and teachers can interact around the child's school experiences; however, the foundation for developing effective school practice to encourage family involvement lies in supporting empowering and collaborative parent-teacher partnerships. When teachers collaborate with parents, for example, to work on issues related to the child's achievement and they develop problem-solving strategies based on shared expertise, both the family and school are strengthened and so is their self-efficacy.

Despite—or as a consequence of—dramatic changes in the structure and function of the American family and increased complexity in type and focus of educational programs for deaf and hard of hearing children, the family-school relationship continues to be a primary resource for support to the family and the child. As economic conditions require both parents to work outside the home and school placements for children who are deaf and hard of hearing are increasingly in mainstreamed settings, the family-school relationship becomes more important as a substantive resource to the child's learning. Educators, researchers and other service providers have come to realize the need for the child's family and community to have active roles in the schooling process. This paper discusses how families and schools can work together so both are better able to care for and foster learning in children who are deaf and hard of hearing.

We focus on four areas we have identified as the dimensions of the family-school relationship. They are: the philosophical or conceptual basis for family-school relationships, family involvement, social-emotional and community-based support, and information, education and skill development. For each area, we propose a number of premises or beliefs derived from a selective review of the literature; these represent a starting point for "what we know" about the area. The four areas were specifically chosen as most likely to directly inform our thinking about family-school relationships.

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Philosophical Basis for Family-School Relationships

Our concept of developing family-school relationships is based on a philosophy of human behavior that supports the strengthening of family functioning (Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Demsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984) as a means of promoting the ability of the family (Rappaport, 1987) to negotiate its developmental course as it encounters life events. This philosophical position is reflected in the ecological, family as social system, and empowerment perspectives and implemented in the practice, for example, of developing family and school partnerships.

This philosophy views families as a resource of knowledge, expertise, and caring regarding their children's schooling experiences. It emphasizes the acquisition of further knowledge and skills that promote parent decision making, choice, and self-determination (Trivette, Dunst & Hamby, 1996). Individual differences and the strengths families bring to school are sought out and valued as is the exchange of information between educational personnel and parent. Responsive and individualized family-school programs address the family's priorities and concerns by promoting both the family's and school's ability to identify and meet the family's and child's goals within an empowerment framework (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994).

> Premise 1: Adoption of an ecological perspective to promoting the development of family-school relationships suggests a new and expanded view of schools working with families.

In the school's work with families, it needs to consider the interrelatedness of the various contexts that surround the child and family (Winton & Bailey, 1994). Family-school programs are most effective if they emphasize strengthening the relationships and interaction within the family—between parent and child, for example—and on reinforcing the relationships between the family and both formal (e.g., the school, community programs) and informal (e.g., friends) supports within the community in which the family lives (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Both child and adult growth is fostered as both the family's and school's capacity as learning environments is enhanced.

> Premise 2: Redefinition of the preparation and role of the teacher (and other professionals) is one of the hallmarks of adopting an ecological or systems approach to developing family-school relationships.

Seeing the child and family as part of a larger social system should lead to change in the way teachers and researchers perceive families and develop new practice. Increasingly, the ecological or systems approach is being used to develop a new paradigm related to children with disabilities and their families. An ecological perspective, for example, encourages the teacher to look beyond the child to the family and the multiple factors in their life (e.g., job work schedule) that may explain (rather than find fault in the individual) particular child or parent behavior and choices. Also, teacher understanding of a family's social support network (e.g., friends, deaf community) is important as is the ability to communicate openly and with respect with parents. Within this paradigm, the

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teacher and parent share expertise regarding the child and establish a partnership to plan and develop a program (Beckman, 1996; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994).

> Premise 3: The ecological or family systems perspective is a basic tenet supporting the school's work with families; this involves a commitment to establishing well coordinated interprofessional cooperation.

An ecological perspective incorporates the child's family and extended family members, networks of other caregivers, school personnel including teachers and administrators, and in all likelihood other professionals. Included in the "other professionals" category in addition to the teacher of deaf children might be the regular classroom teacher, speech and hearing clinicians, medical personnel as well as social service professionals. The importance of interactive, interdisciplinary teamwork is recognized. An ecological perspective gives unprecedented opportunity for parent-professional collaboration (Roush & McWilliam, 1994).

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Family Involvement

Researchers and practitioners have developed a frame of reference for family involvement in education which is defined by the following continuum of types of involvement.

1. Basic obligations of families to support their children's health, safety and development;

2. Basic obligations of schools to communicate with families about school policies and programs (e.g. parent and teacher conferences);

3. Family involvement in the school in various roles: volunteers, aides, audience and attendees at workshop and training meetings;

4. Family involvement in the child's learning activities at home (e.g., homework);

5. Family involvement in school and program governance and advocacy (Epstein, 1988);

6. Family participation in self development programs (e.g., further education related to job training or certificate/degree attainment) (CCSSO, 1991).

Each type of family involvement is recognized as important and valued. To make successful family involvement an integral component of school functions, it is necessary to enhance teacher capacity to work with families as partners in the improvement of their children's education, to make family involvement key to school improvement, and to encourage families in making decisions that affect the quality and content of educational programs for their children (CCSSO, 1991).

> Premise 4: School practice to increase active parent involvement is more effective if teacher attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are associated with empowering influences.

Schools that support an empowerment focus build in opportunities for families to make choices regarding the knowledge and skills they pursue in order to meet their and their children's priorities and concerns (Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1994). Teachers who are positive and approach building the family-school relationship with sincere caring and honesty are more likely to engage in interactions with families that result in empowering outcomes for the family (Fisher, 1983); that is, parent decision making, choice and self-determination (Trivette, Dunst & Hamby, 1996).

> Premise 5: Effective family involvement practice leads to opportunities for parents to choose various types or kinds of involvement with the schools; there is the recognition that any contact schools and parents share is positive and important.

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There are multiple ways families can become involved with their children's school programs. Teacher sensitivity and recognition of the parents' desire to be involved as they choose are important for developing effective family-school relationships. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggest three major constructs explain why parents get involved in their children's schooling: parental beliefs about what they are supposed to do and what is important for their child's education; their sense of efficacy; and their perceptions that the child and school want their involvement. Wood (1974), Petit (1980) and Kroth (1985) have each developed models of involvement; generally, they describe various types of involvement, such as: parents observing at school open-days or during visits to the school; a reciprocal exchanging of information between teacher and parent pertaining to the education program at parent-teacher conferences or home visits; parents helping in the classroom with the teacher; parents becoming a member of a parent advisory group; and parents serving on school curriculum and policy committees. Each type of parent involvement is considered valuable.

> Premise 6: The amount and type of parent involvement in schools is affected by the resources available to families as well as to their perceived need and goals for participation.

Families with deaf and hard of hearing children are a heterogeneous group. The strengths and concerns of the parents, their financial and time resources, the number of children in the family, family relationships and the family's social support network all affect their involvement in their child's school program (Kroth, 1985). Similarly, how parents become involved is influenced by their perceived need for information related to their child's learning, their perceived need for training/skill development regarding specific behaviors (e.g., learning sign language) and their perceived need for programs that offer formal support from professionals (e.g., teacher, counselor) and informal support from others (e.g., parent support groups). When family involvement opportunities are congruent with a family's appraisal of their strengths and priorities as well as with a family's choices, a more effective family-school relationship is likely (Garbarino, 1982).

> Premise 7: The design and implementation of effective school programs to support family involvement lead to tailor-made opportunities that target parents' strengths and priorities.

Effective-family involvement programs are flexible and adaptive in scheduling, location, attendance and, most importantly, in offering different opportunities (e.g., home visits, small groups) and roles (e.g., classroom observer, homework support) in order to accommodate varying strengths and interests of parents. Effective program design and development that support individualized involvement opportunities for parents are based on principles of adult learning (Merriam, 1993).

> Premise 8: Family involvement with their child's school program is most effective when families have opportunities to develop partnerships with professionals.

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Family-school relationships based on collaborative planning and decision-making between the teacher and parent promote equality (National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, 1995) and mutuality of expertise and investment in working toward goals. A family-school partnership represents the most promising context for developing an empowering relationship in which strengths and concerns are identified, needed information is exchanged, strategies that work for parents are developed, and other choices parents wish to make are ascertained (Moeller & Condon, 1994).

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Family Support, Information, Education and Skill Development

Families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing, like all families, need support. The sources of support as well as the specific kind of support needed vary from family to family. Most parents, especially those who are hearing, benefit from information about their child's hearing loss and educational, linguistic, communicative, social, cultural and vocational development. In addition, families unfamiliar with hearing loss typically need to develop skills to communicate effectively with their children.

Programs which are most effective in their work with families are those which reflect key principles of family support. According to Dunst and Trivette (1994), family support programs should be based on the perceived needs of the family and designed to strengthen the family and enhance their feelings of competence. Family support should be flexible, based on the child and family's unique situation, and reflect the culture, values and social characteristics of the community of which the family is a part. The overarching goal of family support is empowerment: providing services which enable families with children who are deaf or hard to acquire the support, knowledge and skills they need to make decisions and advocate for their child and family.

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Social, Emotional, and Community-Based Support

> Premise 9: Families who are supported are better able to meet the developmental and educational needs of their children than families with unmet needs.

Early identification of hearing loss and family involvement in early intervention prior to six months of age have been shown to significantly boost the chances for deaf and hard of hearing preschoolers to achieve age-appropriate developmental milestones (Yoshinaga-Itano & Apuzzo, 1998a); Yoshinaga-Itano & Apuzzo, 1998b). Research with families of both young children and adolescents who are deaf or hard of hearing suggests that families with unmet basic needs, or limited resources in critical areas, are likely to experience difficulty in providing for their children and families. Families with critical concerns unrelated to their child's hearing loss (e.g., health or housing), may require access to support which reduces the demands on the family and enables them to address their children's developmental and educational needs. Most families with deaf or hard of hearing children initially express concerns related to their child's hearing loss, the impact this will have on the family, and the challenge of communication. Unanswered questions or unmet needs surrounding parenting or family issues, their child's social development, academic achievement, or communication may create stress for the family. Social support from professionals, families, friends, or community affiliations has been found to be especially important to families and to reduce stress in some families (Greenberg, 1983; Meadow-Orlans, 1994). Families with social support show more positive parenting behaviors and mother-infant interactions than parents without this support (Meadow-Orlans & Steinberg, 1993). Several studies summarized by Calderon & Greenberg (1997) indicate that parental stress and social support, maternal responsiveness, mother-child interaction style, and maternal communication and instructional styles contribute to the cognitive, social and communicative development in young deaf children.

> Premise 10: Families' priorities and needs for support are related to their children's developmental stage and individual characteristics and the family's ongoing and changing needs, structure, cultural background, socio-economic situation and geographic location.

Families with children who are deaf and hard of hearing are heterogeneous with different priorities and concerns regarding their children's development. Parents first presented with the news of their child's hearing loss may be overwhelmed by their lack of knowledge of the educational, communication, social and vocational opportunities and challenges. During the early years of the child's development families often need much information as well as social and emotional support. After the age of five the quality and quantity of services provided for families decreases (Calderon, Greenberg & Kusche, 1989) despite the support needed by families of older children as they address transitions from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to adulthood and from school to work. A family's identified needs for support will depend upon the unique characteristics of each family and the priorities and significance of the child's hearing loss in the overall scheme of the family's expectations (Meadow-Orlans & Sass-Lehrer, 1995). For example, parents who are deaf tend to have different needs than parents who have no experience

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with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Priorities may also differ for parents who have children who are deaf and have other disabilities (Meadow-Orlans, Smith-Gray, & Dyssegaard, 1995), or have different cultural backgrounds or experiences. Siblings and extended family members, such as grandparents, are likely to have unique issues and concerns which need to be addressed. Research suggests that family members (e.g., fathers vs mothers) may have different views regarding the needs of the child and the ways that they choose to be involved (Meadow-Orlans, 1990).

> Premise 11: Support for families should be designed so that families are able to make decisions, solve problems, and advocate for their children and families.

The birth of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing is unexpected and unfamiliar for most families. The lack of experience and knowledge regarding hearing loss, as well as the often times confusing and conflicting process of the diagnosis results in feelings of inadequacy for many parents. The effects of a deaf child in a hearing family vary from strengthening the relationships to weakening the ties between parents and among family members (Gregory, 1976; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Lack of knowledge and experience may create parental dependency on medical and educational professionals to determine the best ways to communicate and educate their children. Different and conflicting beliefs and biases among professionals often add to the confusion and make the decision making process about communication approaches, child rearing practices, or educational placement and programming all the more difficult. These experiences may leave families feeling powerless (Schlesinger, 1985). Schlesinger and others have noted that the sense of powerlessness may be detrimental to the parent-child relationship and parent-child communication. Providing families with access to complete and unbiased information as well as the skills to communicate with their children (orally or through sign language) may reduce dependency upon professionals and increase their feelings of competence, sense of control and decision making ability.

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Information, Education and Skill Development

> Premise 12: Information and support which result in a positive response to the child are essential to the academic, communicative, linguistic, cultural and social development of the child.

Parents who experience a prolonged period of grieving or denial concerning the child who has a hearing loss, may convey feelings of disappointment, sadness or rejection to the child. Studies indicating the superior educational achievement and social adjustment of children with deaf parents (e.g., Meadow, 1967; Corson, 1973) have suggested that this performance is related, in part, to the acceptance and positive response of their parents (Corson, 1973). Support from other parents who have deaf and hard of hearing children and professionals helps parents develop positive expectations for their child and family (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, Sass-Lehrer & Scott-Olson, 1997). Meeting and getting to know older deaf children and adults who are deaf or hard of hearing who have fulfilling lives and occupations help parents think about the abilities, rather than the disabilities, of their own child and their child's future (Roush , 1994). Programs which include adults who are deaf, such as deaf mentoring programs (Watkins, Pittman & Walden, 1998), provide powerful communication and role models for parents and children.

> Premise 13: When parents have knowledge regarding legal rights and procedures, educational and developmental assessments and goals, materials, technology, personnel and resources they are able to facilitate and monitor their child's educational program.

Parent knowledge of their child's abilities and having high expectations for achievement are important factors in the child's or adolescent's academic success (Kluwin & Gonter-Gaustad, 1992 ; Bodner-Johnson, 1986). Parent involvement in the child's homework and parents reading to their children also appear to be important factors influencing academic achievement (Bodner-Johnson, 1986). Research examining the strategies deaf parents use when reading to their deaf children suggest effective practices for teaching hearing parents how to read to their deaf children (Schlepper, 1995). Parents and professionals may have different expectations of a child's or adolescent's competence or potential which may under (or over) estimate goals for achievement, socialization, or other areas of development. Collaboration between professionals and families may avoid these differences in understanding and promote mutual support for similar goals and expectations.

> Premise 14: Sharing information with parents on issues such as program options, educational and medical interventions, professional and community resources and parenting requires cultural sensitivity and respect for each family's unique perspective and priorities for their child and family.

Child rearing practices, preferred educational program placements, educational or medical interventions, and community involvement and participation reflect each family's

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values and expectations for their children and are heavily influenced by the family's traditions. Information and recommendations from professionals should occur within a context of sharing and respect for the preferences and style of the family. Parent, professional and community organizations and services available to families can provide support, information, education and skill development for families with children and adolescents who are deaf or hard of hearing. Access to services, however, may vary due to a family's resources, education, language or cultural affiliations. Despite variations in child rearing and management practices, parents often find new challenges related to parenting a child who is deaf or hard of hearing (Schlesinger and Meadow, 1972). Parents who are unable to communicate easily with their children may treat their children who are deaf differently than they would their hearing children (Gregory, 1976). Research suggests that improved communication between parents and their children who are deaf or hard of hearing may result in higher expectations for behavior and increased autonomy than when communication between parent and child is limited.

> Premise 15: Effective parent-child interactions and communication among all members of the family is essential to achieving educational potential.

Positive parent-child interactions and parent-adolescent relationships are contingent upon effective communication. Acceptance and accommodation to the communication needs of the child who is deaf or hard of hearing may promote parent-child relationships, improve communication and result in effective parenting techniques (Greenberg, Calderon & Kusche, 1984). Early and on-going parent education and communication skill development may positively influence communication style and effectiveness (Greenberg, et al., 1984; Luetke-Stahlman & Moeller, 1990; Swisher & Thompson, 1985). Communication strategies used by deaf parents with their deaf children may provide effective models for encouraging hearing parents, with deaf children who are visual learners, facilitate acquisition of language (Jamieson, 1995; Spencer, Bodner-Johnson, & Gutfreund, 1992). Communication and parenting approaches reflect family choices and styles based on the family's values and the unique needs of the child who is deaf or hard of hearing. Professionals sensitive to individual differences among families are likely to develop collaborative relationships with families to facilitate and support the communication, language and academic progress of the child.

> Premise 16: Professionals who provide effective support, information and skill development to families possess specialized skills and abilities.

Parents identify the importance of effective listening skills by professionals when sharing feelings, ideas and information. Some have indicated that listening is the most powerful tool available to professionals (Luterman, 1987). Professional observations and interviews with parents and other family members indicate that parents value highly sincerity, respect, honesty and caring when dealing with professionals (Roush , 1994; Mertens, Sass-Lehrer & Scott-Olson, in press). Families want comprehensive, accurate and unbiased information regarding educational and communication options and resources available. Support from professionals regarding decisions that families make,

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despite differences of opinion, is essential to maintaining a collaborative relationship and family involvement.

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